

FACTORS TO CONSIDER BEFORE LEAVING A CHILD HOME ALONE

At the current time there is no clear legal definition as to what constitutes an unsupervised child. In determining if a child is old enough and mature enough to be left alone, a number of factors considered in tandem assists in the determination. They include:

1. Chronological age: Young children from 0-6 years should not be left alone for even short periods of time. Children 6-9 years should be left for only short periods, depending on their level of maturity. The factors to follow should also be considered. Children 10 and above probably can be left for somewhat longer periods, again dependent upon the other factors.
2. How long the child is alone: It is one thing for a parent to leave a child alone a few minutes to run to the store and quite another to leave the child overnight while the parent is on a date. Many elementary school-aged children are left alone after school until their parents get home from work, and this is generally acceptable; however, consideration should be given to the other factors.
3. Maturity/intellectual ability of the child: In considering children's abilities to fend for themselves, one must assess the maturity, general intellectual capability, and level of common sense of the child involved. Certainly children with developmental disabilities or emotional disturbances are at risk when left alone, as are children with other behavioral problems such as fire setting, vandalism, etc.
4. Knowledge of emergency information: Inquire of children left alone what they would do in case of a fire, tornado, stranger at the door, etc. These questions can be framed in the context of "What if...?" interrogatives. Children who are unaware of emergency procedures should be educated and able to comprehend the information before being left alone.
5. Availability of parent, caregiver, or other responsible adult: It is very important for children to know where parents or other responsible adults are and how to reach them in case of an emergency or should the child become fearful and need reassurance. Children who are left without knowledge of where or how their parents can be located are at risk.
6. Extraneous tasks and chores assigned to the child when alone: One should examine the tasks and responsibilities given to children when they are alone. Some children are capable of being alone by themselves but when given the task of younger sibling care, meal preparation, and housework become overwhelmed and at risk.
7. Fear level, insecurity, and emotionality: Some children can become fearful about being left alone while others the same age might not. This variable should be considered, as children should feel comfortable being unsupervised for periods of time. The more fearful the child is, the less likely he or she will be able to respond appropriately to emergency situations.
8. Child's behavior in the absence of the parents: Children who misbehave, vandalize, steal, intimidate neighbors, set fires, expose themselves to danger, etc. in the parents' absence are in need of more intensive supervision. Some children cannot manage their

own behavior in the absence of parental guidance and need to have imposed limits and structure for their own safety.

